‘Fake News, Old News?’

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Recently, the world seems to be experiencing a surge in global fake news. The intense discussions about fake news in the past months may have resulted in an overemphasis on its novelty and in some terminological mix-ups. The presence of purposeful lies and subtle propaganda in the news is hardly a novel trend. The existence of ‘content farms’ producing fake stories to earn real advertising money through viral marketing, however, is, and so it is important to provide some clarity. We therefore want to take this opportunity to reflect on the concept of fake news, asking whether ‘fake’ news might not be ‘old’ news. Based on a brief discussion of literature within Journalism studies, we will make an effort to demystify the term.

In a recent study on the 2009 Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute, Irina Khaldarova and Mervi Pantti illustrate well how layered the notion of fake news is by explicitly linking it to a range of terms such as ‘fabricated stories’, ‘misinformation’, ‘disinformation’, ‘counter-narrative’, ‘strategic narrative’, ‘blame’, ‘scandalous material/reportage’, ‘false news stories’, ‘misleading/sensational images’, ‘set of stereotypes’, ‘propaganda-entertainment’ ‘hostile comments’ ‘bizarre news’ ‘journalistically dubious stories’. They open up a whole conceptual field that may help us to better understand some dynamics of the fake news discussions today.

During the conflict, the Russian authorities used their influences effectively to produce confusion and hegemonic narratives about the conflict in Ukraine. A leading Russian state run television Channel One, is viewed by up to 98 per cent of the population in Russia. According to the authors, approximately 70 per cent of Russian viewers believed that the events in Ukraine were covered truthfully and without bias by government owned channels. Using the methods of “strategic narrative” and “misinformation”, the Channel One explicitly exploited the notions of conflict and tried to reframe or balance the western-style of reporting on the Ukrainian battle with Russia.

Strategic narratives, in the words of Khaldarova and Pantti, are tools for political actors to articulate a position on a specific issue and to shape perceptions and actions of domestic and international audiences. For example, the mainstream Russian media greatly presented the ‘state-narrative’ to support the Russian stance on the Ukrainian conflict and reclaim ‘identity’, rather than reporting on the destructive events taking place during the war. Misinformation, then, are fabricated and distorted news/stories/images reporting on a particular event or conflict. In case of the Ukrainian conflict, Russian authorities controlled the information flows on the conflict and contested the alternative domestic and global media news sources about the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Meital Balmas interprets the phrase ‘fake news’ differently and juxtaposes it with the ‘hard news’. The author termed the ‘fake news’ as ‘satirical news’, ‘humorous political messages’
‘fictitious news’, ‘negative jokes’, ‘inconsistencies of news’, ‘contradictory information’, ‘unrealistic’, ‘pre-generic’, ‘strategic and negative presentation of politicians’, and so on, and thus includes a much broader range of phenomena. She primarily talks about the entertainment-oriented TV programs and late-night talk shows in her research. More precisely the author discusses The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, the Evening News on CBS and a satirical Israeli television show, A Wonderful Country. According to Balmas, ‘fake-news are derived from the hard news, since it is news media, rather than the reality, that generally serves as an input or a reference point for fake news’ (Balmas, 2014, p. 434). The satirical impersonations of politicians in programs she studies, represent them as dishonest, ignorant, incapable and self-centered. She argues that this ‘fake news’ impacts peoples’ political sensibilities and attitudes and enhance the feeling of cynicism towards politicians of any country in general. In some cases, the fake-news program, its hyper-realism, offers social critique in ways that the ‘real news’ cannot, and in that respect, becomes ‘more real than real’. (Ibid, p.6).

‘Fake news’, when it is conceptualized as such, can often receive more prominent attention from the public and mainstream media, for instance during elections. The most recent example is unmistakably the US 2016 presidential elections and specifically after president Trump’s inauguration. American news outlets are being accused of playing a part in disseminating confusion among the citizens. The severe scrutiny of media and journalism in America, whereby the media are accused of bias and sensationalism, is of course coming from the analysts, politicians and from journalists themselves, as Bharat N. Anand notes in a recent article in The Harvard Business Review. Not only are the traditional media agencies being called responsible for escalating fake news and false information, but also the digitalized social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Due to Donald Trump’s use of Twitter for ‘direct political communication’, fake news has recently become particularly discussed in relation to elections.

Another example of ‘fake news’ related to elections and the political spectrum more generally is the Italian television show ‘Striscia la notizia’ and how it tried to shape the public opinion in order to meet the interests of its own organisation and owner. According to Babriele Consentino, the show presents entirely fake news and misinformation to Italian audiences. The show often criticizes against the political class and state institutions and exposes inefficiencies in state organizations. The purpose of the TV show, as the writer argues, is to mobilize audiences for matters of public interests, all within a unique jumble of entertainment and information.

Nevertheless, this TV show developed a strategy of introducing news combined with comedy and propaganda, through entertainment like music. Much of the program ‘shows the model of the confrontational journalism, sloppy reporting and mixing journalism parody and the knowledge presented in the show does not pass reality checks (Consentino, 2012, p. 56-57). Interestingly, in the 1990s, the show dominated ideological discussions and, in the recent past, it had an allegiance with some political parties, such as Berlusconi’s party Forza Italia.
This notable example brings us to yet another conceptual dimension, i.e. so-called ‘propaganda entertainment’. The TV show intended to make negative jokes about ‘hard’ news content. Mimicry, parody and ridicule were an integral part of this reworking of existing news content. Furthermore, such practices are also sometimes conceptualized as ‘confrontational journalism’, particularly when mixing parody, entertainment and real news facts. Some authors warn that this may lead to apathy among audiences because fact-based news is undermined.

Images play a central role in many of the conceptualizations of fake news. Digitization can make unrealistic or false images and photos more realistic than ever. One notable example occurred in 2003, during the Iraq War, Los Angeles Times staff photographer Brian Walski, sent a photo from the war field Basra which was false (namely two different photos combined subtly with digital tools). There were inconsistencies in the image and his actions were considered as journalistically inappropriate and he was eventually fired. In the literature, misleading images are seen as fabricated, manipulated, and self-created images about a situation, which does not have any link to the actual event. When a photojournalist in media presents self-crafted images, especially about conflict situations, he/she has violated the professional ethics, norms, and practices of journalism. The circulation and potential impact of misleading images also become much greater in the digital age because the public (or the audience) also actively contributes to journalistic production.

This brief exploration of different dimensions of, and conceptualizations of fake news shows that it risks becoming a catch all term, obfuscating rather surfacing many problematic aspects of news coverage. Some of these aspects are new, but some very old. The way fake news has come under the attention recently is as a commercial activity linked to the business model of Facebook. The diffusion of (any of kind of) stories with the explicit aim to make advertising money based on the experience that certain stories ‘go viral’ regardless of their truthfulness are not unheard of.

However, approaching the phenomenon more broadly, as some authors do, very popular satirical news shows such as Saturday Night Live or The Daily Show might also be labelled as fake news. These might seem less problematic, as satire is of all times and offers a mirror to politicians and journalists. Still, if we call into question the existence of fake news stories because of their believed impact on citizen’s political engagement, we might equally question the effects of these satirical news shows and the other forms of fake news touched upon in this text.

To conclude, it is important to stress that traditional media and journalists have developed professional ethics and boundaries for themselves, specifically to distance themselves from other forms of information. As a society, we are especially vulnerable to fake news when our journalistic institutions fail to obey to these ethics and codes, leaving the door open to fake news in all its variants. As such, fake news is old news, as it touches upon the fundamentals of journalism practice.
References Références


